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State institutions aim to secure more grants

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Medical researchers associated with the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center brought more than \$42 million to the state last year through projects funded by the National Institutes of Health.

The 99 NIH-funded research projects attack a wide range of medical challenges with science deemed worthy to fund by the federal agency.

Another 20 projects on OU's Norman campus won NIH grants totaling \$4.2 million in 2004.

In all, 208 awards were made to Oklahoma-based researchers totaling \$87.8 million in 2004, a staggering total until placed alongside the NIH funding won by University of California-San Francisco researchers. Scientists from that one university won 1,034 NIH grants totaling a whopping \$438.7 million last year.

A recent USA Today article labeled Cal-San Francisco, Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford University as the thoroughbreds in the race for NIH funding.

So where does that leave the University of Oklahoma, which claimed the biggest portion of Oklahoma's share of the NIH pie last year?

Dr. Joseph Ferretti, senior vice president and provost of OU's Health Sciences Center, says the numbers [2014] faculty members, annual funding [2014] leave OU lagging in the race against the thoroughbreds for medical research grants.

In essence I would say they are the thoroughbreds when you consider that places like Harvard have 4,000 faculty members, Ferretti said in a recent interview. All of those schools are just teeming with the number of people they have. At the Health Sciences Center, we have about 850 faculty members.

As for annual funding, the OU center receives about \$112 million that includes state appropriations and tuition. That's roughly half the nine peer institutions that include neighboring states of Texas, Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Louisiana, Ferretti said.

This goes right to the heart of the solution, he said. We are not funded very well. And that's no secret.

Michael Anderson, president of the Presbyterian Health Foundation, cites a consulting firm's recent predictions that 75 percent of new economic growth in the world will come from innovation.

The foundation for the innovation economy begins with basic research at places, such as the OU Health Sciences Center and the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation, he said.

That's why we measure the number of our scientists, that's where it starts, Anderson said. And that's why we measure the square footage of our wet labs.

Both institutions [2014] OU and the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation [2014] have spun off startup companies that operate out of the nearby Presbyterian Health Foundation's Research Park, created in 1995 to provide the lab and office space to nurture the new businesses.

While lagging the big players in the funding race, Oklahoma's share of National Institutes of Health dollars is growing faster than the national average, said Dr. J. Donald Capra, president of the Oklahoma Medical Research

Foundation. The foundation won 51 NIH grants that totaled \$21.74 million in 2004, the state's second highest total for one institution.

A big reason for our growth has been the funding initiatives spearheaded by Rep. Ernest Istook, who has worked hard to secure grant monies for traditionally underfunded states like Oklahoma, Capra said. As a state, we can only make further gains by building more facilities at biomedical research institutions like OUHSC and OMRF and by providing more funds to those organizations to recruit and retain top quality researchers.

The medical research foundation recently launched a \$100 million capital fund-raising campaign that will result in extensive additions and renovations to OMRF's 55-year-old facility, among other benefits.

At the neighboring OU Health Sciences Center, almost \$350 million of new construction is under way or will be in the next few years. Prominent among the new facilities on campus will be a \$75 million cancer research center that has a targeted opening date of December 2008.

While the thoroughbreds at Harvard and Stanford may be running at the front of the pack in the race for research dollars, OU has intensified its quest for grants. The university has set a goal of doubling its NIH funding, Ferretti said.

To do that, however, is going to require that we get 100 new faculty positions, and that's something we are going to work very hard on in the next several years, he said. I think if that happens then you will see us be competitive with some of these other institutions. Highly competitive.

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GRAPHIC: Graphic: Oklahoma's top five National Institutes of Health awards for 2004

Photo 1: Dr. Joseph Ferretti

The senior vice president and provost of OU's Health Sciences Center, says the numbers leave OU lagging in the race for medical research grants.

Photo 2: Michael Anderson

The president of the Presbyterian Health Foundation cites growth in innovation forecast.

Photo 3: Dr. J. Donald Capra

The president of the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation praises lawmakers' efforts to secure grants.

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